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WHAT IS THE CHRISTIAN RELIGION?

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In the October number of this *Review* for 1912 there appeared, as many readers will doubtless remember, a striking article by Professor Benjamin B. Warfield of Princeton Theological Seminary, under the caption "Christless Christianity." This is his rather clever designation for the religion of those who hold that belief in the historicity of Jesus, however valuable to the Christian, is nevertheless not absolutely indispensable to Christian faith. The article shows a wide acquaintance with the recent literature of the subject, is written in a spirited and forcible manner, and altogether makes an appreciable contribution, as it seems to me, to the clearing up of this interesting question.

As making for this devoutly-to-be-wished consummation, however, what we have chiefly to thank Professor Warfield for is the way in which, having chosen his pre-suppositions, he carries them through to their logical conclusion, and states the result with all the candor that could be desired. He plays the game; he is never "off side." And when he intimates that, in his judgment, the exponents of this "Christless Christianity"—among whom the present writer finds himself included—are not Christians at all, there is no just ground for complaint; it is all in the game. It is a case where, in strict logic, everything depends upon how Christianity is defined.

Dr. Warfield's definition of Christianity and the conclusions which he derives therefrom will be best stated

in his own language, which I quote as follows from the recent article to which reference has been made:

"There surely ought to be little difficulty in determining what Christianity is. . . . Unquestionably, Christianity is a redemptive religion having as its fundamental presupposition the fact of sin, felt both as guilt and pollution, and offering as its central good, from which all other goods proceed, salvation from sin through an historical expiation wrought by the God-man Jesus Christ. The essence of Christianity has always been to its adherents the sinner's experience of reconciliation with God through the propitiatory sacrifice of Jesus Christ."

"He is a Christian, in the sense of the founders of the Christian religion and in the sense of its whole historical manifestation as a world-phenomenon, who, conscious of his sin, turns in faith to Jesus Christ as the propitiation for his sins, through whose blood and righteousness he may be made acceptable to God and be received into the number of those who are admitted to communion with him."

"Christianity as a world-movement is the body of those who have been redeemed from their sins by the blood of Jesus Christ dying for them on the cross."

"A Christianity without redemption—redemption in the blood of Jesus as a sacrifice for sin—is nothing less than a contradiction in terms. Precisely what Christianity means is redemption in the blood of Jesus. No one need wonder therefore that, when redemption is no longer sought and found in Jesus, men should begin to ask whether there remains any real necessity for Jesus. We may fairly contend that the germ of Christless Christianity is present wherever a proper doctrine of redemption has fallen away, or even has only been permitted to pass out of sight."

"From the Christian point of view it may very properly be said (though this is very far from all that needs to be said) that those who are advising us that Christianity can get along very well without Christ, are very much like men sitting by a brookside and reasoning that since we have the brook we do not need the spring from which it flows, and may readily admit the doubt whether there is a spring. If even this criticism does not seem valid to our Christless Christians, that can only be because they no longer occupy the Christian point of view."

"The point which needs particular pressing lies indeed just here—that in separating themselves from Jesus as the source and ground

and content of their faith, they sever themselves from Christianity and proclaim themselves of another religion."

Now by those who cling to the older orthodox, evangelical supernaturalism these statements will be accepted as a matter of course. Once the above definition of Christianity is adopted, understanding the term "redemption" in the narrow sense in which it is intended, there is no escape from the conclusion which the Princeton theologian draws. We would reserve the right to remark upon the simile of the brook and the spring in a later connection, but we would unhesitatingly grant that, from the point of view of Professor Warfield's definition, the opinion that belief in the historicity of Jesus is not indispensable to Christian faith is essentially unchristian, and that those who hold it should no longer be regarded as Christians. Speaking for himself, the present writer would say that, *with Christianity so defined*, he would have to confess not only that he is not, but that he does not see how he ever could be, a Christian. He would take the liberty, however, of expressing his own opinion, not indeed that his opponent is not a Christian, but that his opponent's theory of redemption is not only not essential to Christianity, because contrary to reason, but moreover essentially unchristian, because opposed to the principles of sound morality.

Precisely here then is the question demanding consideration: is the given definition of Christianity a fair one, or is it virtually a dogmatic begging of the whole question under dispute? Agreeing with my opponent so far as to regard Christianity, for our present purposes, as a religion—for it would be possible to view it not only as a religion which has had important consequences for morality, but also as a morality which has had important consequences for religion—I must undertake to raise once more the much-debated question: just what, essentially, is the Christian religion?

If we would avoid, as far as possible, dogmatic question-begging, our first inquiry must be methodological. Just how is the essence of the Christian religion, or, for that matter, the essence of any historical *quantum* to be determined? In general, either one of two methods is employed by those who claim not to be influenced by any practical interests in their solution of the problem. These methods are the method of comparative religion and the method of church history, or, as they might be called, the external and the internal method, respectively. The method of comparative religion is to treat Christianity as a species of the genus religion, and to define it in logical fashion, therefore, in terms of the qualities it shares with all religions, limited by those which are peculiar to itself alone. Now while such a definition would fulfil the requirements of formal logic, it might nevertheless yield a very inadequate working conception of the real nature of the Christian religion. The reason for this is that there are elements in Christianity which are neither common to all religions nor yet peculiar to itself alone, and it might very well be that some of these should turn out to be, as judged by practical standards, quite indispensable features of the religion in question. Still, it must be admitted that we cannot be said to have included all that is essential in any religion that is really best until we have mentioned something which is to be found in itself alone; and so this characteristic method of comparative religion, while inadequate by itself, may serve to test and supplement a definition arrived at in some other way.

But while the common fault of comparative religionists is to view the essence of Christianity too abstractly, the besetting temptation of the church historian is to repudiate the idea of essence and to present only a confused conglomeration of particulars. The variety of religious beliefs, practices, and experiences, the mutual

conflict and contradiction even, within what in the course of history has been called Christianity, is already, of course, sufficiently notorious. Still, it is difficult to take quite seriously those who contend that the only essence of Christianity is the totality of the phenomena that have been called Christian. *Theoretically*, this is what one would have to say from the standpoint of scientific history, which is supposed to be the absolutely disinterested investigation of the causal relations of the phenomena of human life and action. But even the most scientific historian must limit himself; he cannot make a scientific study of all phenomena, and as a matter of fact all historians in their own thinking do make a selection in accordance with the purpose and interest underlying their thought. The idea of a history in which phenomena are selected and their causal relations traced without regard to any practical interests and purposes, is a regulative idea of an end to be discreetly approached within definite limits, as the mariner approaches the fixed stars, never to be actually reached. The scientific historian, to be sure, often declaims against the concept of essence; but this is really because, when he finds the term "essence" used, it commonly reflects other interests than his own—practical interests which interfere, as it seems to him, with strictly impartial historical inquiry. But such interference is by no means necessary. All that is required for scientific history is that practical interests be kept from leading to an arbitrary selection of the causes by which the previously selected phenomena are to be explained. The selection of effects, like the original selection of the phenomena to be studied, not only may be controlled by practical human interests; it must be so controlled, if the history is to be interesting to practical human beings. Any history that is to be more than a mere indiscriminate chronicle of causally connected events, any history that is to select from the

events of the past what is of interest for any purpose in the present, must recognize some distinction between the essential and the non-essential elements of the total accessible phenomenon. Harnack, selecting from historic Christianity what he took to be essential for the religious life of the modern man, was truer to the idea of essence than Loisy in his attempt to avoid any such selection.

But in the present instance there is not even the supposed scientific-historical reason for identifying the essence with the totality of phenomena. The discussion is avowedly on the basis of present-day religious interest, and we must mean by Christianity what it is for that interest. Unless we can feel that all that has ever been called Christian is equally good and important for the true religious interest of today, a selection will be made in spite of ourselves, and ought to be made. Professor Warfield's definition is, on the face of it, the result of such a selection. The only question, therefore, is as to how—under the guidance of what principles—the selection is to be made.

If no universally valid normative principles can be found, then the whole search after essence will issue in unrelieved subjectivity. There will be as many different essences as there are different purposes underlying interest in the reality under consideration. There will be no essence but the "nominal essence," which in any particular case is simply whatever, for the purpose of the individual, it may seem necessary to select from the total phenomenon.

But we cannot readily resign ourselves to this conclusion as our ultimate position; for while we cannot disavow the practical nature of our interest in the inquiry, we are equally aware that what we seek is a universally valid or real essence, not what is of perhaps but transient interest to some particular individual.

Nor need we go far afield to find at least the beginning of a solution of our problem. If a selection for a purpose is to be made, if the essence is necessarily *what is essential for a purpose*, two normative principles are at once suggested. In the first place, the essence must be in the total actuality; and in the second place the controlling purpose must be the right purpose in the given situation, the purpose to realize what, under the circumstances, is the true ideal. In short, *the essence is whatever is both present in the actual and demanded by the ideal*. To guarantee that what is taken as essential is the real essence, what is taken as the ideal must be the true ideal. The formula will require modification, of course, in any case where, in view of the purpose concerned, the reality is essentially bad. In such a case the essence is that in the actual, the elimination or avoidance of which is demanded by the ideal. In the present instance, however, we are concerned with the essence of the Christian religion in the good or constructive sense, and, whatever else it may be, it must be that in the totality of the religious phenomena of Christianity which is a necessary factor in the realization of the true ideal for humanity, and of the true ideal for human religion in particular. The determination of the essence of the Christian religion has then as its prerequisites a descriptive and a normative task. It requires that one know on the one hand the varied phenomena of the Christian religion, and on the other hand the nature of ideal religion.

But there is one special condition which it is important to emphasize in connection with the essence of any reality. It must be able to maintain itself after it has been selected and separated from all that is non-essential, for an essence that did not exist would not have the required factor of actuality; it would not be a real essence. If there are in any reality elements which it is

essential to have eliminated, and if the reality is such that, when the elimination has taken place, what is left loses all vitality and power of self-maintenance, that reality has no good essence; it is essentially bad, for, so long as it endures, the bad will remain in it. If on the other hand there is a reality, some element of which is demanded for the realization of the true ideal, and such that that selected element retains its vitality after the elimination of objectionable elements, the reality in question is essentially good. Or, coming closer to our particular subject of interest, it may be that in the total phenomenon of some historic religion there are both that which it is essential to retain and that which it is essential to eliminate in the interests of ideal religion. In this case, it will have both a good and a bad essence, it being assumed that what is good can retain its vitality after the bad has been eliminated, or, in other words, that the religion in question is essentially good. If, however, there are in any religion both that which it is essential to eliminate, as, for example, superstition, and that which it might seem essential to retain, as, for example, its moral dynamic, and yet the moral dynamic cannot be retained after the superstition has been overcome, then that religion can only be said to be essentially bad; judged by sufficiently critical standards, it has no good essence; the good is not vital in dissociation from the bad. In addition then to being the highest common factor of the actual and the ideal, *the essence must be vital enough to persist in separation from all that must be eliminated.* In the case of religion the conditions of this vitality will be best discovered by historical and psychological investigation.

Let us now summarize the results of our methodological discussion. We seem to have arrived at four or five normative principles. (1) The essence must be found in the actual. Thus far is the would-be scientific his-

torian correct. (2) The essence is a necessary part in, or factor toward, the true ideal. What this true ideal is, must be determined by a critical philosophy of values. (3) The question as to what is essential has not been sufficiently tested until objectionable elements, such as irrational ideas, have been eliminated. (4) When this elimination has been made, what remains must be vital enough to endure in new and unobjectionable relations, if it is to be regarded as the real essence of the reality in question. (5) The essence of the best member of any group must contain something not found in the essence of any other member of that group. This concession to the comparative religionist is made, as likely to be practically helpful in working out the application of our methodological principles, although logically it adds nothing to the other four principles.

The essence of the actual then is that element in the actual whose continued existence is demanded by the true ideal, and which can retain its actuality and vitality after the elimination of all objectionable elements from the actual at the demand of that same ideal. We must now apply this definition of essence in the attempt to discover the essence of the Christian religion. In making this attempt we shall use the biological approach to the question; first taking religion as a special development of the actual life-process, and then Christianity as a special development of religion.

Life in general, and human life above all, may be regarded as a process or activity directed, consciously or unconsciously, toward the realization of certain ends or values. From time to time crises occur in which obstacles are met, which obstruct the realization of those ends and threaten to destroy experienced values. In this critical situation a new activity is called for, a new adjustment to the environment. Commonly this takes the form of a search for and discovery of some element in the

environment which can be depended upon as a means of deliverance from the obstacle, and an adjustment to this instrumentality, a use of it, in the way necessary to secure the desired deliverance. Then with the removal of the obstacle life goes on as before, save that now there is a new value appreciated, the value of that which has been a means of deliverance in the time of crisis. In the higher forms of life, and after crises that have been acute, there tends to be an appreciative contemplation of that which originally was of interest simply as means; it may even be recognized as a new value, experience of which is regarded as one of the ends of the activities of life. And then, as a result, primarily, of deliverance from the crisis, and, secondarily, of the new attention to that through which deliverance was obtained, there may arise new thoughts, new feelings, and new modes of action.

Now the question as to what kind of life-process religion is, is centrally the question as to the kind of deliverance or "salvation" experienced; but for the full understanding of the nature of the religious life-process the stages previous to and following this experienced deliverance must be taken into account. The values originally appreciated, or ends pursued religiously, may be, and in the history of religion have been, as various as the values and ends of human action; they may be grossly physical and purely selfish, or supremely spiritual and beautifully altruistic. A crisis is not religious, however, unless the obstacle is such as is not, or seems not to be, readily removable by one's own power, or through the natural means or human agencies within the reach of the individual. But when the natural and the human fail, there is called forth the feeling of absolute dependence. So long, however, as this is simply a realization of crisis, it is not yet distinctly religious. Characteristic religion begins where there is exercised, for deliverance from the obstacle, a definite active dependence upon some real

or fancied supernatural and superhuman power in the environment. According as this supernatural and superhuman factor is conceived, the adjustment thereto will be directed. When the desired deliverance ensues, it must be either because of the objective correctness of the adjustment, or because of a chance coincidence. In either case credit will be temporarily given to the religious object, the superhuman and supernatural Power, as interpreted in the thought by which the adjustment was guided. The deliverance, or "salvation," will be interpreted as a "miracle," i.e. as a "revelation" of the presence and activity of the supernatural, superhuman reality. There will be aroused, consequently, feelings of awe and appreciation of the higher Power by which one has been befriended. This is the attitude and experience of worship, attaining in its more highly specialized developments the distinctly mystical state. The state of dependence, with the consequent deliverance, is practical religion; the state of appreciation is mystical religion. The combined experience of deliverance and of appreciation of the supernatural, superhuman object by means of which it has been accomplished, may lead to new thoughts (beliefs, creed) about the religious object; new emotions with their expressions, at first spontaneous but later conventionalized (forms of worship, ritual); and new ways of acting under the influence of the religious consciousness (religious morality, obedience to the law of God).

If now we are to determine the specific nature of essential Christianity, we must have in mind not only the phenomena of the history of Christianity, but also a clear idea of the nature of ideal religion. Now one of the characteristics of ideal religion is rationality. By this term we do not mean the quality of being guided by "pure" or non-empirical reason; on the contrary, we would maintain that there can be no guarantee of

rationality in thought which has not been moulded upon reality as it is known through experience. Rational religion, as we mean it, is religion founded upon reality, religion criticised and modified until fully verified in the light of human experience.

Ideal religion then must be rational in the empirical sense; in other words, it must be scientific. But it must also be in harmony with all valid human ideals. It would not be ideal religion if it were unfavorable to any true ideal. But aside from religion itself, there is one element in the spiritual ideal that is uniquely important, not only as being an ultimate end, but also because its presence is necessary for the highest possible development of the other elements in the ideal. This element is morality. We can say, therefore, that if experience gives us warrant for assuming that there can be a radically moral religion, not only would it serve one of the most important, or the most important, of human ideals; in serving morality it would serve all true human ideals at once. Ideal religion, therefore, whatever else it may be, must at least be moral. This will mean that while the supernatural, superhuman Power depended upon for deliverance must be thought of as favorable to valid human ideals in general, the moral ideal must be included, and the deliverance accomplished through religious dependence must be, whatever else it may be, a moral deliverance.

We are now ready for the question as to the essence of the Christian religion. Unless the Christian religion is essentially bad, as it would be for instance if the irrational elements could not be eliminated without its vitality being destroyed, it must be in essence whatever in actual phenomenal Christianity is necessary for the realization of the true ideal of human spiritual life in general and of human religion in particular. Turning now to historical Christianity, we find, along with other

features more or less intimately and permanently associated therewith, a deeply vital moral quality. The ends or values for the preservation and increase of which the religious relationship is invoked, are fundamentally moral. The situation in the face of which the feeling of absolute dependence arises is the crisis caused by sin, in one's self or in others, as an obstacle to the realization of the true ideal for the individual and for society. The supernatural, superhuman Power which is taken as the object of religious faith is conceived as favorable to the removal of sin and to the realization of true moral values. The adjustment to that Power is a moral adjustment. It is an adjustment too by means of which moral values are meant to be and can be promoted beyond what is possible without it. The mystical contemplation of the religious object is, according to the principles of this religion, to be controlled by what is demanded by one's moral duty to one's fellow-men. Finally, no expression of religion is countenanced which is at variance with the most conscientiously determined moral ideals. This pervasive moral element then, being common to actual Christianity and to ideal religion, must be viewed, tentatively at least, as belonging to the essence of the Christian religion. Christianity is the religion whose "miracle" or "revelation" consists in the experience of *moral* "salvation," or "redemption." If it be objected that a moral element is to be found in other historic religions also, the reply is that this does not invalidate what has been said as to Christianity being essentially the religion of moral redemption. The most essential thing in any religion may conceivably be the sort of moral deliverance experienced by its votaries through dependence upon a superhuman reality. If however we would distinguish the essential quality of the Christian religion from other religions more sharply, we can perhaps find no more accurate modifying term

than the word "Christlike." Christianity is the religion of deliverance from unchristlikeness to a Christlike morality, through a Christlike attitude toward a Christlike superhuman reality. This distinction would serve, we think, to mark off the essence of Christianity definitely from the essence of any other moral religion.

It may be remarked, in passing, that it would not be quite accurate to say that Christianity is, as Professor Warfield's "Christless Christians" are supposed to hold, "only a particular way of conceiving God, with the emotional and volitional accompaniments and consequences" thereof; it is centrally a kind of religious experience, of deliverance from a crisis, together with the way of conceiving God and the religious attitude which make that experience possible. There must be an essentially Christian belief, i.e. the belief necessary to mediate the essentially Christian experience; one must believe that the Christlike God is, and have sufficient knowledge of the right religious adjustment to be able to co-operate with God's work of moral salvation.

There is good ground to suppose then, we take it, that redemption from unchristlikeness to a Christlike morality and ultimately to a Christlike fellowship with God, accomplished in the life of man by the activity of the Christlike God in response to a Christlike dependence and filial attitude on the part of the individual, is the essence of the Christian religion. It is that in actual Christianity which it seems undoubtedly necessary to retain, in order that ideal religion, and thereby an ideal human spiritual development, may be realized. But there is one condition which must be fulfilled before this supposition as to the essence of Christianity can be regarded as sufficiently verified. The elements selected from phenomenal Christianity for survival must be able to survive after the elimination of whatever is contrary to ideal religion. Can the vitality of Christianity as

a religion of moral salvation be maintained after the irrational features of historic Christianity have been removed? If not, then Christianity is essentially irrational, and therefore essentially bad. And what we are here especially concerned to maintain is that, if moral salvation is not possible through a religion which refuses to be guided by the particular idea of redemption insisted upon by Doctor Warfield, then the Christian religion is essentially bad; its supposed good essence is not vital when separated from all irrationality; it has no really good essence. Or, to express our opinion differently, if essential Christianity is what Doctor Warfield says it is, it is essentially bad, for the simple reason that it is essentially irrational. We would maintain however that his statement of the essence of Christianity is incorrect, and that the Christian religion is essentially good, that it has a real essence which is good, a good essence which will still prove to be vital when this and all other irrational elements have been eliminated from its theology.

There are many Christians today who fear for the life of Christianity whenever there is talk of any such radical and drastic operation upon the body of traditional Christian doctrine as this elimination of all irrationality. We would contend, however, that the operation must be performed some time, if the life of Christianity is to be saved. "The old that ages, he must let go who would hold fast the old that ages not." What we are interested in is the retention in full vitality of the spiritual dynamic of the Christian religion, in separation from the many irrationalities inherited from a less critical and scientific age. We would retain the spiritual dynamic of Christian supernaturalism, with its belief in a special, and in some sense miraculous, revelation. We would retain what we believe Professor Warfield is really most interested in conserving, viz. the undimin-

ished vitality of Christian evangelicalism, with its message of the historic mediation of the saving grace of God to the individual man. Moreover, we would retain the vital essence of Christian orthodoxy, with its view of the one divine Being, God the Father Almighty, revealing himself for the salvation of the world in Jesus Christ, his Son, and as the Holy Spirit operating in the lives of men for their regeneration and spiritual perfection. But it is too late in the history of human progress to seek to conserve *in toto* the old supernaturalism, the old evangelicalism, and the old orthodoxy. If then the result of the elimination of the irrational features of the older Christianity should be to make it in some sense, as our critic seems to fear, a new religion, we can answer with confidence that, unless Christianity should turn out to be essentially bad, our method expressly provides that this new religion shall still be essentially Christian. It will be a union of the essence of Christian supernaturalism, of Christian evangelicalism, and of Christian orthodoxy; a combination which must make our threatened "new religion" nothing less than a new Christianity.

First, then, let us try to make clear what we mean by *the essence of Christian supernaturalism*. Briefly stated, what we mean is religious experience guided by the belief that there have been, and still are, certain events of human history and experience which, as compared with other events, are of special significance, objectively as well as subjectively, as revealing the purposive activity of the supernatural, superhuman Being which is the object of religious dependence and worship; and that, other things being equal, the more closely events approximate in character the spiritual triumphs which, we have good reason to believe, were achieved by the historic Jesus through his cultivation of the religious life, the more centrally they are the result of the

direct activity of God and reveal his character and purpose. To give up miracle in this sense would be to give up revelation in the sense in which it has significance for modern practical religion.

It will be readily understood that we are not here defending the notion of that magical supernaturalism which would contradict our scientific knowledge of nature. On the contrary we would maintain that what Professor Warfield commends as the appeal "from a naturalistically biassed to an unbiassed historical criticism" is really the appeal from the presuppositions of the scientifically informed to the prejudices of the scientifically ignorant, or else to a more or less obscurantist, and therefore perverse, "will to believe." It is not logically essential to Christian faith that one should believe that human parthenogenesis, or the re-animation of dead bodies, or any such events as the miraculous multiplication of loaves and fishes, or the stopping of a storm, or the killing of a fig-tree with a word, ever really happened; but it is logically essential to the Christian, for the verification of his faith, that he be able to point to empirical, and therefore historical, evidence of the operation, within human experience, of a supernatural and superhuman Power. We can be religious in the Christian sense without the former beliefs, but not without the latter. Moreover, while it is difficult to see how the person of critical disposition and scientific training could ever be sufficiently certain of the truth of narratives of events of the former sort to be able to build a positive religious life upon them, even the scientific and the critical are not excluded from becoming practically certain that Jesus of Nazareth was a real person, whose spiritual triumphs were due in no small part to the essential rightness of his religious attitude, i.e. that there was an objective response to his dependence upon a superhuman and supernatural

assisting Power. But even if one could not be practically assured of this in the case of the historical Jesus—and this has been our central contention—we could find other empirical evidence sufficient for practical certainty as to the fact and the further possibility of spiritual miracle in the sense defined above. We can find this evidence, if in no other way, by ourselves reproducing as faithfully as possible the essential features of the religious attitude ascribed to Jesus by early Christian tradition.

It may be remarked in this connection that Professor Warfield's analysis of what he calls "Christless Christianity" can be shown to be quite wide of the mark, when he says, "Always there lie at the basis of the reasoning the twin assumptions of the old rationalism: the assumption of the adequacy of pure reason to produce out of its own inalienable endowments the whole body of religious truth which it is necessary or possible for reasonable men to embrace, and the assumption of the inadequacy of history to lay a foundation of fact sufficiently assured to supply a firm foundation on which the religious convictions and aspirations of reasonable men may rest." Without undertaking to speak for more than himself, the present writer, as one of those criticised, would simply call attention in the first place to how distinctly empirical and non-rationalistic is the basis of faith, as he views it; and, in the second place, to the fact that, feeling practically certain of the historicity of Jesus, he does not hesitate to appeal to the religious experience of that supreme member of our race as giving empirical support of quite unique importance to the essentials of Christian faith. But just because the demonstration of the truth of Christianity is fundamentally empirical rather than "rational," it becomes highly desirable to supplement the proofs that have served in the past. We must have Christian evidences

that cannot be reasonably called in question by the historical critics. The discovery of a rational demonstration is "once for all," in a sense that is not true of empirical proof. Empirical facts are not all equally accessible. Generally speaking, those belonging to the past are less accessible than those belonging to the present, and those belonging to the immediate experience of others are less accessible than those of one's own immediate experience. For these reasons repetition in the present and in our own immediate experience is called for. And inasmuch as repetition in present experience does really supplement those deficiencies of historical evidence which arise from the fact that it belongs to the past, the appeal to any one event of the past could only be indispensable in case sufficient empirical evidence in the present could not possibly be secured. But to say that the religious experience possible for the Christian today will never amount to verification of Christian faith, is to assume a position essentially sceptical rather than Christian.

But there must be included in the essence of the Christian religion not only the essence of Christian supernaturalism; *the essence of Christian evangelicalism* must also be conserved. Expressed briefly, this is the seeking of salvation—defined ultimately as Christlikeness of spiritual life—through a Christlike religious dependence upon and fellowship with a Christlike divine Being, "the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ."

In its older form this Christian evangelicalism was associated with many irrational elements. God was thought of as having been made propitious by an artificial and external transaction other than the becoming righteous of the one who had sinned; the legal punishment was thought of as having been transferred by the divine Judge from the sinner to the sin-bearer,

a transaction involving the irrational notion of a transfer of guilt from the sinner to the substitute by an arbitrary fiat of the Almighty. God was thought of as being satisfied with the righteousness of the suffering substitute arbitrarily credited to the unrighteous. Redemption was thus regarded, not as a human experience, but as a wholly transcendent transaction. Now these irrational elements cannot be essential to Christianity, unless we have been mistaken in supposing that Christianity is essentially good. The guilt of sin is non-transferable, and so is the merit of righteousness. Any God who acted as if guilt and merit were transferable would be a God seriously deficient in moral discernment.

That these elements in the older interpretation of the Christian evangel are irrational is not all; they are distinctly antagonistic to the essentially Christian view of God. It is nothing short of humiliating to find it necessary to point out that the God of the Christian is an honest God, who will by no means clear the guilty; but it is this very element, this confused and sub-Christian notion of substitutionary punishment on the one hand and substitutionary justification on the other, to which Professor Warfield still clings, along with many others, in the mistaken idea that it is nothing less than the quintessence of the Christian religion. What Professor Warfield has stated to be the essence of the Christian religion has indeed been associated with historic Christianity; but being irrational, it cannot be of the essence of Christianity. Indeed holding, as it does in effect, that God's transactions for the salvation of man are not rigidly moral, it must be pronounced essentially unchristian.

We have been quite willing to admit that if Professor Warfield should prove to be correct in his definition of the essence of Christianity, he would also be correct in

his insistence upon belief in the historicity of Jesus as logically indispensable to Christian religious faith. But what we are concerned to point out is that whenever belief in the historicity of Jesus has been logically indispensable to Christian faith, it has been because of the irrationality of certain presuppositions in the minds of the believers. With the early Jewish Christians it was the irrationality of their apocalyptic eschatology and Messianism; with the early Greek Church it was the irrationality of their magical notion of the making of human substance immortal; with mediaevalism, to which apparently our opponent still adheres, it was the irrationality of an arbitrary externalism in ethics and jurisprudence. If however we have progressed far enough toward the universalizing of Christianity to have eliminated these irrationalities of Jewish apocalypticism, of pagan magic, and of mediaeval externalism, we can retain the essence of Christian evangelicalism, without having, as Christians, to commit ourselves beforehand to any one outcome of the historical criticism of the New Testament rather than another, as being logically indispensable to our faith.

It should be understood, of course, that what we have meant all along by the term, "Christian faith," has been Christian faith *in God*. There is, to be sure, a Christian faith in Jesus. What we know of him with practical certainty through history gives us the greatest confidence in his character and in the fundamental correctness of his religious attitude. We believe, indeed, that his religious adjustment and experience were such that we can trust him as our best religious guide in all human history. When we become his disciples in religion, we are led into fellowship with our divine Father. We truly express our trust in him, and our appreciation of his value for our religious life, by speaking of him as the historic mediator of our salvation; he is the revealer of God to us and our

saviour. Moreover, as we shall emphasize in another connection, we believe that the divine will and activity had such unhindered course through his life that his very person may be appropriately and truly described as divine; he was *the* divine man. Now to this Christian faith *in Jesus*, belief in the historicity of Jesus is, of course, logically indispensable. It is possible moreover and convenient, to set forth the essence of the Christian religion in terms of the Christian faith in Jesus; *convenient*, but, as we would still insist, not absolutely *necessary*. This may perhaps be more evident after we have indicated what we take to be the essential features of Christian evangelicalism.

It is essential to the Christian evangelical point of view that the Christian moral law of unselfish love be recognized as valid and binding upon every individual. This devotion to the spiritual deliverance and unification of mankind, which with practical certainty we may take as having been best exemplified in the moral example of the historic Jesus, is not the Christian gospel; rather is it the Christian law, but it is that without which no gospel is truly Christian. The righteous will of the God of the Christian can be satisfied with nothing short of the reproduction in the individual of a Christlike moral devotion. But the essence of the Christian gospel is not to be found in the moral example of Jesus taken by itself; it is to be found rather in the religious example of Jesus as giving the key to his moral achievement. The Christian evangel is the gospel of the power of God manifesting itself in a Christlike morality on condition of the cultivation of a life of Christlike religious devotion. It is the gospel of the universal possibility of redemption as a human religious experience, through following the religious example of Jesus, taking the attitude of sonship toward the "God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." If it be objected that this adopting of what we

are practically certain was the religious attitude of Jesus is neither possible nor appropriate in the case of one whose life has been full of sin, the reply is that the sinner's first step toward the Christlike religious attitude is the step of repentance and trust which marks his reconciliation with the Father. Since it is the divine power which is manifested in the Christlike moral life in response to the Christlike religious adjustment, the Christlike is divine, and the divine Christlike; and therefore the holy and righteous God is to be thought of, even by the sinner, as eminently approachable, in that he is also the God of Christlike mercy and love. The essence of the Christian gospel, then, is that God is full of love and grace; so that the repentant sinner has simply to come trustfully to God, to be reconciled to the Christlike heavenly Father. Then if he abides in a Christlike religious attitude of dependence and surrender, he will be enabled to progress triumphantly in the living of a Christlike moral life of unselfish service to humanity.

In thus formulating the essential elements of Christian evangelicalism we have not forgotten that so long as there fails to be associated with our religious teaching a strongly vital, regenerating, spiritual dynamic, our message can scarcely be called, in the full sense of the word, evangelical doctrine. There was nothing more essential in the older evangelicalism than its power of converting individuals to a Christian moral and religious life. It was a rainbow of hope, over against the dark clouds of fear. Neither the hope nor the fear, to be sure, was completely rational; traditional eschatological notions, exaggerated for effect, played too prominent a part in the whole "plan of salvation." But the evil of sin and its consequences, while it may be misrepresented, can never be exaggerated; and the insistent emphasis upon the imperative necessity of redemption, of regeneration, which characterized the older evangelicalism, must be

retained, albeit in rational form, if the newer Christianity is to be fully evangelical. There is a hell of possible human experience to be saved from; but salvation, redemption, other than regeneration and what can be defined in terms of human experience, there is and can be none. To *experience* salvation, however, we must follow the moral example of Jesus; and to follow the moral example of Jesus sufficiently to be saved, we must follow the religious example of Jesus. But in view of our sin, as we have seen, before we can do this, we must come in repentance to God, and trustfully depend upon him for forgiveness. Then do we experience reconciliation, at-one-ment with God, and to experience this is regeneration.

It ought to be clear that, from this point of view, while belief in the historicity of Jesus may be *psychologically* indispensable, temporarily at least, to the steadfast evangelical faith of many individuals, it cannot be shown to be logically indispensable to the retaining of the essence of Christian evangelicalism. With much of what Troeltsch says in this connection we can heartily agree, for what he has in mind for the most part is the psychological necessity of this belief. We should be very far from agreeing however that if, for good and sufficiently critical reasons, the historicity of Jesus had to be given up, the death-knell of Christian religious faith would be sounded. This is not the voice of Christian faith, but of unchristian distrust and fear. The values of essential Christianity are too great and too deeply appreciated by the experienced Christian ever to be given up universally unless it should become logically necessary. It is through defect of rationality that anything not logically necessary comes to be, for individuals and temporarily, absolutely necessary, psychologically, as a means to a necessary end. Wherefore, an essentially Christian evangelical faith being logically possible without the presupposition

of the historicity of Jesus, we can never show any reason, unless it be the intellectual deficiency of individuals, why Christian faith without absolute dependence upon belief in the historicity of Jesus should not become a universal psychological possibility. As logical necessities tend to become psychological necessities, as man develops in rationality, so what is not logically indispensable tends to become not psychologically indispensable. On the one hand metaphysics, which is logically necessary to the theology of Christian faith, is still in the case of many individuals by no means necessary psychologically; and yet, with the progress of rationality, it tends to become so. To the early Christian Church, on the other hand, the speedy visible return of Christ seemed indispensable; and to expect it *was* psychologically indispensable, perhaps. Indeed, according to their reasoning, it came to appear logically indispensable to their faith also. But as we now see in the light of later history, it was not really logically necessary to their faith, and was psychologically necessary only by reason of their misconceptions. The same thing may be said of the psychological and logical necessity of belief in the historicity of Jesus for the sustenance of the faith of the Christian. If belief in the historicity of Jesus should continue to be humanly indispensable—and *this* is something which I, for one, have no heart to deny—it will be because humanity cannot consent to give up that matchless personality, not as a means to Christian faith or to anything else, but simply as an end, a value conserved and cherished from ultimate and supralogical motives.

But finally in retaining, as belonging to the essence of the Christian religion, the essentials of Christian supernaturalism and evangelicalism, we are virtually bound to include also *the essence of Christian orthodoxy*. Now from the time of the first formulation of the Trini-

tarian and Christological dogmas, these statements have been regarded—and not without reason—as being the expression of the very quintessence of Christian orthodoxy. Nevertheless, it has for some time now been distinctly recognized by critical historians of Christian thought, and for a much longer time indistinctly felt, that these ancient dogmas also embody much that is very far from essential to Christian faith. It is our remaining task to seek to specify just what is the real essence of Christian orthodoxy, and in the light of our result to raise once more the question as to whether, for the sake of Christian orthodoxy in this modern sense, belief in the historicity of Jesus is indispensable.

One of the insights which is becoming increasingly clear as the result of the application of comparative and historical methods to the study of the early history of Christianity, is that this religion of ours was, in its origination, a fusion and further development, under the influence of the experience and thought of great religious personalities, of two great religions—Jewish ethical monotheism and the mystical-philosophical religion which had grown up among the Greeks. The Christianity which conquered the Greek civilization of the period was undoubtedly the result of the most important and far-reaching synthesis of the practical and mystical elements of religion that had taken place within human history, and the chief intellectual expression of this synthesis is to be found in the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. The Christological dogma is to be understood partly as corollary, partly as complement, and partly as exposition of this Trinitarian dogma which preceded it.

Practical religion, as it develops, soon comes to demand a personal God. In the light of experience and reflection, this practical religion becomes less and less magical and more and more moral. Its God comes to

be thought of as thoroughly moral, first as the righteous Judge, then as the perfect heavenly Father. Mystical religion, however, tends to think of the ultimate religious reality as the All-One, the impersonal or super-personal Absolute. The God of practical religion is transcendent; the God of mystical religion is immanent, especially in the mystical experience itself. Here then was an apparent contradiction between the postulates of the moral, practical faith of Judaism and the intuitions of the metaphysical, mystical religion of Hellenism. Christianity, coming out of Judaism, and going forth into the Hellenic world, felt called upon and also able to retain the values of both points of view, and to reconcile the seemingly contradictory theologies.

The outcome was the Christian dogma of the Trinity. In this dogma there is the characteristically mystical affirmation of the super-personal divine substance, manifested in the deeper religious experiences of the finite individual, who becomes thereby partaker of the divine nature and endowed with eternal life. At the same time there is the affirmation of the almighty and fatherly personal God demanded by practical religion. The particular form which this synthesis took was chiefly due to the facts of Christian religious experience, interpreted with constant reference to the chief figure of Jewish-Christian tradition, Jesus the crucified and exalted Messiah.

Assuming the Christian tradition, Greek mystical religion by itself would have interpreted Jesus as a person in whom was manifested in remarkable fulness the inner presence of that same super-personal divine Being which is also inwardly presented in all mystical experience, and whose rational expression is indeed "the light which lighteth every man." It would have had the doctrine of one super-personal Absolute, manifested historically in Christ, the divine Man, the incarnation of the

Logos, and also manifested continuously in Christian experience, whether this last were expressed in terms of the "Holy Spirit," or not. To the moral, practical religion of the mere Jewish disciple of Jesus, however, the Master was simply a man, uniquely honored as the representative of the one personal God, the heavenly Father, and sending forth, by virtue of his death and resurrection and unique relation to the Father, his holy spirit, or invisible presence, for the assistance of his disciples. Attempting however to combine the Hellenic and Judaic points of view, the early Christian theologians devised the impressive but self-contradictory doctrine of the Trinity, with its one and only one supreme super-personal God, or divine substance, and its three supreme, eternally equal divine persons. Roughly speaking, trinitarian Christianity undertook to solve the problem of the conservation of the values of both mystical and moral religion by means of the simple process of addition. For the plain man, apart from the subtleties of Greek metaphysics, the upshot was the affirmation at once of monotheism and tritheism, the acceptance of which had to be enforced with the threat of eternal punishment for all unbelievers.

If we are to determine what is really essential in Christian orthodoxy, we must learn to appreciate the doctrine of the Trinity, not so much for what it accomplished as for what it attempted, viz. the retention, in one religious view, of the values of moral, practical religion on the one hand and of mystical, philosophical religion on the other. The essence of Christian orthodoxy is whatever element or factor of its theology is required for the realization of the ideal combination of moral with mystical religion, each at its best. The irrationalities of historic Trinitarianism must be removed, but its vital essence must be retained. Historic Unitarianism gained comparative rationality, but at the

expense of religious vitality. It did not keep all that was essential in Christian orthodoxy. It retained, in somewhat rationalized form, the originally Jewish ethical monotheism of Christianity, without an adequate mystical appreciation of the divine reality present in the historic Jesus and in the religious experience of the Christian. On the other hand there is in process of development today a form of mystical religion whose weakness is that it does not see how to retain, along with its mystical appreciation of the divine in the human, the practical values of dependence upon a moral, personal God. As distinguished from both historic Unitarianism and contemporary mysticism, the new Christianity for which the world is waiting, essential Christianity in rational, scientific form, will retain all that is valuable in both the moral and the mystical element. It will, we believe, because it must and ought, and therefore surely can. It will not give up the unity and personality of God. Neither will it abandon the faith that the divine Spirit is present and at work in the spiritual experience of the Christian. And granted the historicity of Jesus, it will not give up the divinity of that matchless human person.

It ought to be apparent by this time what our reply will be to Professor Warfield's remark that his "Christless Christians" are "like men sitting by a brookside and reasoning that since we have the brook we do not need the spring from which it flows, and may readily admit the doubt whether there is a spring." He has misstated the analogy. Rather is it that we know from experience and observation the value of the water in the brook of present-day vital Christianity, and it has this value whoever may have been the historical person or persons in and through whom it first made its appearance. Whether the "spring" was a group of Syrian mystics, or, as we have no doubt it was, Jesus of Nazareth,

the creative source of this water of life is none other than the very being and activity of God. It is interesting to note that we have here a modern version of the old *filioque* controversy which split the ancient Catholic Church. At the same time we have, in the position taken above, the key to the solution of the problem. The Christian religious experience, or the operation of the Holy Spirit, proceeds, metaphysically speaking, from God the Father alone, as the Greek Church contended. But if, accepting the results of scientific New Testament criticism, we hold to the essential historicity of Jesus, we must maintain that this Christian religious experience or operation of the Holy Spirit proceeds not only from the Father, but also, historically speaking, from the Son. So is the contention of Western Christendom, in its essence, at length vindicated.

Thus will the new Christianity retain in rational form and, we may believe, without necessitating any loss of vitality, the essence of Christian orthodox theology as well as of Christian supernaturalism and Christian evangelicalism. And one of its marks will be that, without insisting that belief in the historicity of Jesus is indispensable for Christian faith, it will nevertheless attain to a scientifically tested practical certainty with reference to the essential historicity of Jesus, and will thus be able to enjoy all the advantages that come from knowing that the religion proposed for our acceptance is the religion which Jesus lived, and the religion which has always found its highest individual revelation of God in the spiritual life of Jesus, the Christ. It will *not* be a Christless Christianity.

What then, essentially, is the Christian religion? What is it in actual, historic Christianity that is necessary for the realization of ideal religion, and that can retain its vitality after the elimination of all irrational and other objectionable features from its traditional

form? Christianity is in essence the religion of discipleship to Jesus; the religion of faith in Christ as the divine Saviour of humanity; the faith that finds God in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself. Or, differently stated, Christianity is the religion of the experience of Christlike divine grace; the religion whose universally accessible miracle is the experience of redemption from unchristlikeness to a Christlike morality, through a Christlike religious dependence upon and fellowship with the Christlike Heavenly Father. Or, again, Christianity is the religion of the regeneration and sanctification of the individual and of society through the indwelling presence and creative activity of God, the Heavenly Father—the Holy Spirit, whose presence and power in the life of Jesus of Nazareth made him the divine Redeemer, the Son and Christ of God.